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... And the Bishop's Misreading

The trouble with bad manners, Stendhal somewhere along the line apostrophized, "is that it can lead to crime." It takes a certain amount of sleuthing to travel from remarks made by a bishop at the funeral of William J. Casey to log the distance between bad manners and crime, but it can be done. Totalitarian dictatorship is the greatest crime conceivable (TDs killed about 30 million people—so far—under communism, a comparable number under Nazism and Maoism, then more still under Pol Pot in Cambodia). It follows that step-by-step totalitarianization under the Sandinistas is a criminal march toward the grand criminal event, total power.

Bishop John McGann was a good friend of Bill Casey, and for that reason found himself at the altar, invited to pronounce a eulogy in the presence of 350 mourners who included the president of the United States, a former president of the United States and dozens of reporters, all of whom had been handed by the bishop, ahead of the ceremony, the news-sexy paragraph. What it did, substantially, was to deplore "the violence wrought in Central America"—by the Reagan administration's support for the contras.

The bishop went on to say that Casey's "conviction about the fundamentally moral purpose of American actions, I'm sure, made incomprehensible to him the ethical questions raised by me as his bishop about our nation's defense policies since the dawn of the nuclear age. I'm equally sure," the bishop granted,

"that Bill must have thought us bishops blind to the potential for a communist threat in this hemisphere as we opposed and continue to oppose the violence wrought in Central America by support of the contras."

Any student of philosophy, however easygoing, will spot the confusion in that sentence. Obviously any Christian—and most non-Christians—opposes "violence," whether in Nicaragua or in Cambodia. But the question confronting the Reagan administration is simple: Does the United States sanction the use of force against Sandinista totalitarianism? We sanctioned the effort to replace Somoza's dictatorship by the use of force. And the hero books of the century are punctuated with tributes to those who sought—yes, by the use of force—to resist the totalitarians. The Resistance fighters did so in France and in Germany and in Italy during World War II, and the Philippines did it against the Huks, and the Greeks did it against the communists, and the Yugoslavs did it against the Nazis—and, however anemic despotism was in those days—we did it, by the force of arms, against the British a couple of hundred years ago.

Bill Casey was a super guy. It was so wonderfully appropriate for his family to have specified that, instead of flowers, his friends and admirers should send donations to the "William J. Casey Fund for the Nicaraguan Freedom Fighters." Perhaps this was the provocation that the bishop could not endure, prompting him to do the generic thing, most often illustrated by the tale of the concert

musician who, before he begins playing, addresses the audience: "Before I begin, I should like to say a few words about foreign policy. . . ."

A few years ago Vanessa Redgrave, accepting an Oscar, devoted the time reserved for her to thank the voters and acknowledge the contributions of the other actors in the film, to denounce Zionism and whatever else it was that rubbed her the wrong way. A following speaker was Paddy Chayefsky, the playwright. He said that he would not be able to sleep that night if he merely went on with his prepared text. Instead, he took a minute to say that Redgrave had not, in being honored in Hollywood, been tendered an invitation to give her views on the policies of Israel. He received a stirring ovation.

And Jeane Kirkpatrick, extemporizing her tribute to Casey after the bishop was done, received a spontaneous ovation from the congregation, beginning just behind the presidential first pew.

What she said about Bill Casey was that he was a "bold, committed man, in an age rent by controversy." And she said then, with that rhetorical trenchancy for which she is justly renowned, that he was not "afraid of the devil." But Casey was a God-fearing man, and he knew that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, before whom, one confidently believes, those who struggle against the totalitarians will confidently appear.

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